

INSIDE
HIGHER ED

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AUGUST 2014

Educating Nontraditional Students

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SMART DEGREE
THE CLEAR PATH TO YOUR FUTURE

A New Approach to Enrollment



Dear College and University Leaders,

The non-traditional student holds such appeal, but also challenges. As someone who has spent most of my career working in higher education, I've considered both sides of the issue.

Let's start with the non-traditional market. 60 million adults age 25 and older have some college credits but no bachelor's degree, and 90% (or 54 million) of these adults are not currently enrolled in college¹. The good news is most students who have dropped out have thought about going back². This is a significant pool of prospects.

However, the challenges that come with the non-traditional market are very real. Throughout my enrollment efforts within this market, I learned one essential lesson: **It's not enough to just recruit non-traditional students. It's equally important to ensure they're prepared to succeed in college.**

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SMART DEGREE IS A FOUR-STEP SYSTEM TO DEGREE COMPLETION:



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2. Assessments: Academic and career assessments ensure students are appropriately prepared to succeed in degree programs.



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Smart Degree provides students with an independent source of guidance and preparation. Smart Degree partner schools enjoy the exclusive access to prepared, motivated degree completers and the unparalleled control over their recruitment efforts.

I encourage you to contact me to discuss how Smart Degree can help you reach non-traditional students. Please call me at **201.477.7782** or email me at **Dale.L Leatherwood@SmartDegree.com**. I look forward to hearing from you.

It's time to take back the reins.

Dale Leatherwood
Managing Director, Business Development, Smart Degree

INTRODUCTION

Even if educators (and this booklet) frequently use the term “nontraditional students,” the term makes little sense at a growing number of colleges and universities. That’s because the term assumes a dominant population of “traditional” students – 18-22 year-olds who enroll shortly after graduating from a high school that has prepared them well for college. And at many campuses, the unusual students would be those who are thought of as traditional. Further, many campuses that have relied on a traditional population realize that they can no longer find enough such students – so institutional sustainability depends on serving broader cohorts of students.

But it’s one thing for a college to say that it wants a broad cross-section of students, and another for a college to actually recruit, retain and graduate these students. The articles in this booklet explore issues related to admissions and financial aid, different educational approaches, the use of technology, the use of alternate curricula and more. Other articles explore enrollment trends. The articles deal with a range of nontraditional students, including age, race and ethnicity, status as veterans and more.

Inside Higher Ed will continue to cover these issues and we welcome your reactions to these articles and your suggestions for future coverage.

--The Editors
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A New Opportunity to Reach the 54 Million Non-Traditional Students

DISCOVER SMART DEGREE, A MORE INTELLIGENT APPROACH TO STUDENT ENROLLMENT

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Students are assigned a mentor to guide them through the process.



2: Assessments

Academic and career assessments ensure students are on the right path to success.



3: Gen Ed Courses

Students save money on their degrees by accessing discounted courses from a non-profit, regionally accredited university to transfer into your institution.



4: Student Marketplace

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News Articles

In the Dark on Data

By Paul Fain

Adult students aren't using College Scorecard and other consumer websites as they consider college, and they aren't interested in performance metrics like graduation rates and debt levels.

Web sites that measure how colleges stack up are all the rage these days. But prospective adult students aren't using those tools, and are instead relying on information from friends, advertisements and college websites.

That is one of the central findings of a November 2013 report from Public Agenda, a nonprofit research group.

For example, a national survey that was part of the research found that only 18 percent of adults who were considering enrolling in college had used interactive websites like the Campus Explorer or the White House's College Scorecard. In accompanying focus groups, few said they had even heard of those sites.

Only 21 percent of the survey's respondents spoke to a counselor who advises students about how to get into college in the past year, while 30 percent said they learned about colleges from a financial aid adviser.

In contrast, 76 percent of the surveyed potential students said they learned about colleges from friends, families and colleagues. And 64 cited advertisements on TV and billboards

as sources.

Yet a full three-quarters of respondents said enough quality information about colleges is "out there."

That probably isn't true, the report said.

"Despite being confident that they can find the advice and information they need to make good decisions, most prospective students lack what many experts and policymakers consider to be key pieces of information," it said.

The study, which is dubbed "Is College Worth It for Me? How Adults Without Degrees Think About Going (Back) to School," was based on a national survey of 803 adult prospective students as well as meetings of eight focus groups. Public Agenda received funding from the Kresge Foundation

for the research, which was used for a previously released report on attitudes about online learning. A related report on the for-profit higher education sector is forthcoming.

The new study also delved into the contentious debate over for-profits.

Potential students had little understanding about for-profits' financing and governance structures, according to the survey. They became more skeptical about the sector when the term "for-profit" was used in the focus group and when they were told about the "basic differences" between how for-profits and nonprofits operate.

For example, researchers showed focus-group participants graphs that compared for-profits with other institutions on prices, graduation rates and loan default rates.

The focus groups appeared to be one-sided attacks on for-profits, said Noah Black, a spokesman for the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, the industry's primary trade group.

"Much like we have witnessed in the public policy arena," Black said in an email, "if you put forth biased and

Many adult prospective students don't think it is essential to find out about school quality indicators that experts often consider key.

Figure 14: Percent who say it is absolutely essential to know the following before enrolling at a school:



Source: Public Agenda

one-sided information and accusations about institutions, you can negatively impact the opinions.”

He said the study’s principal findings, including adult students’ favorable take on online courses and quality instruction, support the reasons why adult students often choose for-profits.

In its recommendations, the report suggested consideration for “leveling of the playing field for marketing to adult prospective students.”

For-profits tend to spend heavily on TV and web ads that often reach this group. As a result, “more marketing of unbiased information and better outreach by nonprofit institutions might be necessary, or at least explored,” the report said.

However, Black said nonprofit institutions do plenty of marketing, including through big-time college athletics.

DON’T KNOW, DON’T CARE

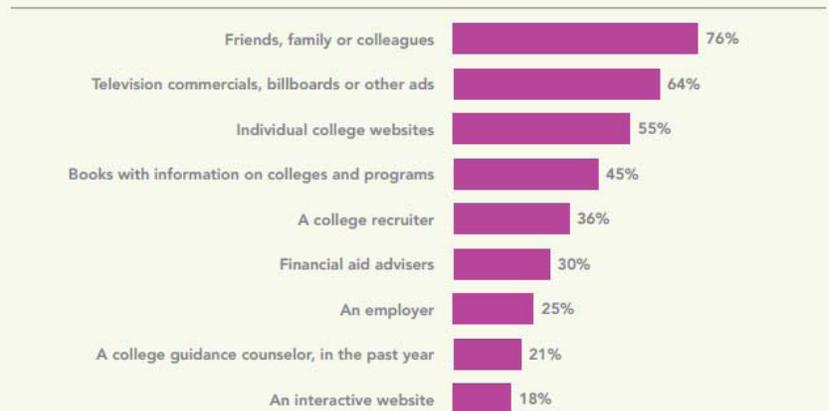
Adult students are a large and growing portion of American higher education. Slightly more than a third of first-time students do not enter college right after high school, the report said, and a third of undergraduates are older than 25.

This group doesn’t just lack awareness about how to find data on college performance; prospective adult students aren’t particularly interested in key “accountability” metrics, according to the research.

Lawmakers, foundations and consumer groups are pushing hard for colleges to make more information available about how their students

Adult prospective students are most likely to learn about colleges from friends and family, commercials and specific schools’ websites.

Figure 11: Percent who say they have utilized the following resources in their college search:



Source: Public Agenda

fare, including graduation and transfer rates, average debt levels and what sort of jobs graduates get.

Yet the survey found lukewarm feelings among potential students about whether those measures are valuable. Only half of respondents said knowing the average debt levels of graduates is essential information about a college. Faring worse were graduation rates (47 percent) and information about what jobs and salaries graduates typically get (45 percent).

Furthermore, just 17 percent of respondents cited significant worries about dropping out of college. That contrasts with the reality that more than half of adult students will fail to complete a bachelor’s degree within six years.

“It’s not going to work to just put the data out there,” said Carolin Hagelskamp, vice president and director of research at Public Agenda.

One reason for the apathy about

metrics, according to participants in focus groups, is a common belief that they reflect more on students than on an institution. “I don’t really care about what their graduation rate is, because that’s on me” said a man during a focus group that was held in El Paso.

Potential students liked the information on College Scorecard and similar websites, at least when prompted to try them out by focus group organizers. And respondents who had heard of those tools gave them good marks.

Some focus group participants wondered why the websites weren’t better marketed and felt “cheated” for not having seen them before.

One woman at a Detroit focus group had substantial debt from an online degree program that she didn’t finish, according to the report.

“I wish I had had this information a couple years ago,” the woman said. “That would have been wonderful.”

Transformation From Within

By Paul Fain

College leaders need to get involved in the disruption debate and do more to help adult students, finds a “manifesto” issued on the American Council on Education’s letterhead.

Higher education is facing a disruption, but the biggest driver of change is getting lost in the hype. That’s the message of a January 2013 report commissioned by the academy’s primary trade group, the American Council on Education.

“There is indeed a transformation coming in American higher education,” writes Louis Soares, a special policy adviser to the council’s president, Molly Corbett Broad. “It is not driven by technology or MOOCs, though these tools abet the change. It will be driven by the rise of post-traditional learners.”

Soares, who is a fellow at the Center for American Progress, defines post-traditional learners as the working-age population, between ages 25-64, who lack a college credential but are seeking to get ahead while balancing jobs with educational and family responsibilities.

This group is a growing presence in higher education, and has become the norm by some measures. Yet they fare worse in college than traditional students, graduating at lower rates. The reasons for this lag are understandable: older generally students typically have rusty academic skills and little scheduling flexibility, and often lack good information about

what sort of job they might get with a college credential.

College presidents need to step up to help adult students do better, according to the report, which carries the subtitle: “A Manifesto for College Leaders.” Soares writes that colleges must rethink their institutional, instructional and business models to improve how they serve the post-traditional learner.

Much of the conversation about innovation in higher education is occurring outside of the academy, Soares said. He would like to see that change.

“We need your voice here,” said Soares. “It’s a time for institutional reinvention.”

ACE issued a disclaimer with the report, noting that it reflects the views of Soares, and not necessarily those of the council. But the strongly worded exhortation out of One Dupont Circle, where ACE and other higher education groups are located, will no doubt raise some eyebrows. And Broad signaled tentative support for the report’s message.

“The issue of increasing attainment rates among all Americans, including adult learners, is of great importance to the higher education community and the national as a whole,” Broad



Louis Soares

said in a written statement. “Soares offers some intriguing ideas about the role innovation might play as higher education leaders continue to address the pressing issue of post-traditional learners and attainment.”

Demand from adult students is growing rapidly, and that in turn is leading to increased interest in alternative forms of credentialing and learning. These innovations, which Soares calls a “new ecosystem for learning validation outside of the academy,” include corporate training universities, prior learning assessment and competency-based forms of education.

Rather than resisting these emerging forms of learning, the paper argues that college leaders should consider them “partners and tools to lead the vanguard of transforming the very system they now control.”

ACE is poised to play an increasingly prominent role in the adult student market. It has long been a leader on prior-learning assessment, mostly through credit recommendations it issues for learning that occurs



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Mentors



Assessments



Gen Ed Courses



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in military and corporate training programs. It is pushing to expand this work, with new hires and a more

vocal emphasis. And the council is now considering credit recommendations for a handful of courses offered by

Coursera and Udacity, two major providers of massive open online courses (MOOCs). ■

Within Striking Distance

By Paul Fain

New data on the 31 million Americans who attended college but failed to earn a credential, including details about 4 million who are almost there.

Americans who attended college for a while but never earned a credential might be the key to achieving the ambitious college completion goals the White House and influential foundations have set.

It's a big group. More than 31 million people enrolled in college during the last two decades but left without earning a degree or certificate and have not returned to higher education for at least 18 months, according to new data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

Many dropped out quickly. Roughly one-third -- or 10 million -- of the identified noncompleters left college after enrolling for just a single term, according to the study, which the center released in July 2014.

Among the remaining 21 million former students who attended college for more than a term, about 17.5 million failed to get beyond two years of academic progress. The remaining 4 million moved past the two-year mark.

This group, which the report calls "potential completers," should be the most relevant to policy discussions around the national college completion push, the center said.

For example, the report cites Project Win-Win. The Institute for Higher Education Policy conducts the project, which has tracked down 6,700 former students who had either earned enough credits for a degree or were within striking distance. As of last fall 4,500 students had received degrees through the program.

The most common type of potential completer is 24 to 29 years old and has been out of higher education for two to six years, the report found. About 600,000 women and 630,000 men fit this description.

More than one in four potential completers enrolled in college continuously or intermittently for seven years or longer. And the study found that about 36 percent spread their enrollments over four to six years.

"These results suggest that standard cutoffs for measuring student graduation rates (typically 150 percent of program length) are inadequate," said the report. "Significant numbers of students continue to make substantial progress toward a credential for many years longer."

MORE DATA, MORE QUESTIONS

The new report advances what is known about the some-college, no-degree population. Until now the U.S. Census has been the primary data source on the group. The Census found that roughly one-fifth of working-age Americans have attended college at some point but do not hold a degree.

The Lumina Foundation has cited that number in its call for increased degree completion. But the center's report, which Lumina funded, goes beyond that raw figure by showing more detail about former students' experience in higher education.

The clearinghouse has access to student records for 96 percent of the total U.S. student population. More than 3,600 institutions provide information on enrollments and degree production to the nonprofit group, which conducts transcribing and research services for its member colleges.

As a result, the center was able to

“These students represent a vast resource of untapped educational capital that the country can ill afford to overlook. This report represents the most comprehensive data available of students’ attempts to navigate their path toward a college certificate or degree.”

use the clearinghouse database to track virtually all students who had at least one enrollment record at a U.S. college during the last 20 years.

Ensuring that students complete their degrees or certificates should be a national priority, said Joni Finney, a professor the University of Pennsylvania’s Graduate School of Education.

“These students represent a vast resource of untapped educational capital that the country can ill afford to overlook,” Finney said in a written statement. “This report represents the most comprehensive data available of students’ attempts to navigate their path toward a college certificate or degree.”

One surprise the report found was that so many of the potential completers attended four-year institutions only, said Afet Dundar, the center’s associate director and a co-author of the report.

The same proportion -- 35.6 percent -- of potential completers attended four-year institutions exclusively as completed two-year institutions exclusively. About 30 percent attended both types of institutions.

Dundar said one might have predicted that former community

college students would dominate the potential-completer category -- despite the fact that a two-year degree requires fewer credits and should take less time to finish.

The reason, she said, is that community colleges enroll most of the nation’s lower-income and less academically prepared students, who are more likely to drop out of college.

That was the case for multiple-term enrollees (more than one term but less than two years). About three-quarters of this group attended two-year institutions exclusively, or before or after attending a four-year institution, the study found.

The report compared characteristics of potential completers with those who successfully earned a credential. Not surprisingly, potential completers “stopped out” -- meaning they took a break from college before returning -- more often than completers did. They also spent more time along their pathway.

The center didn’t try to explain why so many Americans had short, failed stints in higher education -- such as why 10 million left after a single term or less. But the report laid out two opposing interpretations of those findings.

TYPICAL POTENTIAL COMPLETER

24-29 years old

Left college 2-6 years ago

Attended college for at least 2 years

“Stopped out” at least once before leaving for good

As likely to have attended 4-year college exclusively as 2-year college

“This population may be viewed by some as representing the inefficiencies of a poorly aligned educational system that does not adequately prepare students with the academic skills or resources necessary to succeed,” the report said.

“Others might argue that these students are a reminder of the immense opportunity offered by postsecondary institutions to students of all types, even those whose optimism and ambition may later turn out to have exceeded their determination or academic preparation.” ■



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With Smart Degree's Student Marketplace, you can attract the best student prospects while also promoting your school and saving time and money on recruitment.



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The Student Marketplace provides a forum to participate in a cost-effective solution, promoting your school and attracting the best student prospects.



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The Student Marketplace allows you to review profiles of students seeking degree programs, helping you find those who fit your school's curriculum and culture.



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You have the power to make a complete enrollment offer, and only make offers to students you hope to recruit.



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Your only cost is incurred after the student selects your school.



Save time

You'll save time on student assessments and procuring student transcripts, because Smart Degree does it for you.



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Your rates will improve thanks to students who are prepared to complete their degrees and enter the workforce.

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Mentors



Assessments



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Competencies Come to Campus

By Paul Fain

Lipscomb University shows what competency-based education can look like in its blended form, both in-person and at a liberal arts college.

NASHVILLE -- Mart Sessler has gone far with his associate degree. He worked his way up to vice president of information systems at a large insurance provider. But after 25 years in his field, Sessler decided he wanted to become a pastoral counselor.

That meant going back to college. And he would have to earn a bachelor's degree before going on to get a master's in counseling. As he scanned college websites, Sessler realized he would have to take introductory courses, many for the second time.

Sessler wasn't thrilled about the thought of sitting through Western Civ next to 19-year-olds. And he worried about the transferability of credits from his associate degree, which he earned right after high school, in the 1980s.

He was discouraged, and felt like earning a bachelor degree "would take forever."

Then he discovered a new competency-based program at Lipscomb University, a small private institution located here, where Sessler lives.

Competency-based education is a hot idea, albeit not a new one. But as it is with anything in higher education, there is great variation among numerous emerging models. And understanding

how they work is complicated by the fact that competency-based programs don't look like much like most peoples' vision of college.

On the least-ambitious end is an approach that merely embeds "competencies" into a conventional degree program. Loosely defined, a competency is a specified knowledge, skill or ability that a student can demonstrate, typically through an assessment.

Some colleges have converted curriculums into competencies, replacing or supplementing traditional, course-based chunks of learning. That approach opens the door to several competency-based degree tracks. But it could also be just window dressing -- pinning a trendy name on the tracking of student learning, which the college should be doing anyway

One of the pioneers of taking competency-based education to a more advanced level is Western Governors University. Students progress in the nonprofit institution's degree programs by successfully completing assessments that measure their competencies. The university provides faculty members, but they function mostly as tutors or coaches and don't teach conventional courses. Students can move through

recommended online coursework at their own pace. They can also skip right to the assessments.

A new and even more aggressive form of competency-based education is dubbed "direct assessment." Western Governors matches its competencies to credit hours and course equivalencies. In direct assessment programs, however, competencies are completely unmoored from the credit hour standard. Students can earn a degree as quickly, or as slowly, as they master the required competencies.

Southern New Hampshire University's College for America was the first to earn approval from the federal government and its regional accreditor for direct assessment degrees. It offers online associate degrees in general studies. Next through the gate was Capella University. The for-profit, online university has five direct assessment business degree programs -- both undergraduate and master's.

Lipscomb's new degrees don't fit in any of these categories. But the religiously affiliated university, which enrolls about 4,300 students, is a rare example of how liberal arts colleges might give competency-based education a whirl. And experts say Lipscomb's cutting-edge assessment center could be replicable at many institutions, perhaps as a franchised export.

While the university is an early adopter of an emerging form of higher education -- which many think has the potential to transform the academy -- its leaders aren't looking to disrupt anything. Officials there say the new

competency-based programs will enrich traditional ones, not replace them.

Lipscomb's president, L. Randolph Lowry, says the university has no plan to enroll large numbers of online students in its competency-based degree programs. Instead he hopes to tap a more modest-sized market of adult students.

"Could we have 1,000 students in a program like this and serve them well?" Lowry asks. "Probably so."

JUDGES' SCORES

The benefits of Lipscomb's competency-based program have hardly been modest for Mart Sessler.

After enrolling in October 2013, he forked up \$1,500 to participate in a daylong, in-person assessment of his baseline competencies (see accompanying article). This form of prior-learning assessment is an intensive look by trained assessors at how incoming students behave and perform in a workplace setting.

Students can earn up to 30 credits in the assessment center. And successfully participating in the process is worth three credits in itself.

Sessler says the experience was grueling. He and five other students spent eight hours in a room with three faculty assessors. They participated in group projects, worked through mock job assignments and gave presentations.

One task was particularly challenging for Sessler. The assessors gave his group 75 minutes to deal with a fictional employee's "in-basket" of 16 e-mails, memorandums and phone



Students at Lipscomb University's assessment center

messages. The mess of paper is too much for most students to conquer in that amount of time, so the exercise becomes one of triage.

He took too much time reviewing the package, Sessler says, and missed the last page, which was an organization chart for the faux company.

The morning after his day at the assessment center, Sessler and the other students met individually with an assessor to learn how many areas they were deemed competent in, and how many credits they would receive for those competencies.

Sessler says the review of his skills, abilities and knowledge was "dead-on accurate."

Students' competencies are rated on a four-point scale. Zero is inadequate. One denotes an elementary competency. Higher scores move from an "applied" performance to advanced and, finally, strategic at the fourth level.

Sessler was deemed to be a level-

one on problem-solving and decision-making. While that feedback stung, the insurance executive did better in many other areas.

The assessments were "in tune and in focus with where I am," Sessler says, adding that he has discussed the results with both his boss and direct reports at his current job. "Where I did poorly, I knew those weaknesses."

During his morning meeting with an assessor, Sessler was told he received the maximum of 30 credits. The university also accepted the majority of the credits from his associate degree as transfer credits. He says his \$1,500 investment paid off, big time.

"I wasn't starting at square one," he says. "It was awesome."

Sessler is currently working toward a bachelor's degree in integrated studies at Lipscomb. He is enrolled in traditional, classroom-based courses. Sessler says he was enjoying a philosophy course this spring. But he

also has a coach who is helping him improve his competencies.

FACULTY INCENTIVES

Charla Long is the driving force behind the Lipscomb's foray into competency-based education. Long, who is dean of the university's New College of Professional Studies, says Lipscomb's goal is to help adult students figure out what they need to know and do to get a good job.

That means the university listened to local employers while creating the program. And Long said the end product is about meeting students where they are.

"What are your gaps?" she says. And how can the university fill them "quicker and more effectively" than in a traditional degree program?

The university measures student progress in 15 competency areas, such as active listening, organizing and planning, presentation skills and problem-solving and decision-making. Those competencies in turn apply to six categories – communication, conceptual, contextual, interpersonal, leadership, management and personal.

University credits for competencies apply to 22 adult-focused bachelor's degree programs in the College of Professional studies. They include business administration in accounting, social work, psychology and information technology. The adult-focused degrees are not aimed at traditional-age undergraduates, who make up the bulk of Lipscomb's total enrollment.

In addition to its spin on prior-learning assessment through the

daylong intake sessions, Lipscomb also uses badging as a key part of its competency-based offerings. Both prior-learning assessment and badges recognize learning by students that occurs outside the academic setting. That can be either innovative or controversial, depending on your perspective.

Students in the competency-backed majors must successfully earn at least second-level mastery on 24 credits worth of competencies. Those credits don't apply to conventional courses, but to competencies that are embedded in the curriculum.

The university issues digital badges for students' achievements on competencies -- in cases where undergraduates receive at least a second-level rating. Badges can be displayed on students' e-portfolios, where employers can see them.

Faculty members who teach in Lipscomb's new competency-based programs will also be judged in part on students' competencies. That's because they can receive pay bumps based on student progress. Instructors who have been trained as coaches on competencies can get raises if enough students improve their levels. And just passing students won't cut it, because the assessments are not managed by instructors or coaches.

"I need to know that I have a teacher who's in it to win it," Long says. "They can double their compensation by moving a class of students."

Unlike at Western Governors or College for America, Lipscomb's competency-grounded degree

programs aren't self-paced. While students at the university can "test out" of credits based on competencies they bring to the table, the rest are earned the old-fashioned way – through campus-based and online courses.

Students in the College of Professional Studies must complete their final 30 credits through coursework at the university. But they can earn up to 30 credits through competency-based assessments, and transfer in up to 94 previously-earned credits – 63 from a two-year institution. (Each degree requires 126 credits.)

"That's what we call the hybrid model," says Belle Wheelan, president of the Commission on Schools of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), which is the university's accreditor.

(The term "hybrid" has a different meaning when the U.S. Department of Education applies it to competency-based education. Lipscomb's program is not a hybrid in this context, as all of its competency-based credits link back to courses.)

Breaking a curriculum into competencies is tough work, she says. But Lipscomb got it done, earning the association's approval for its competency-based programs last fall.

"They're the first out of the chutes for us," says Wheelan.

'NEW FACE OF LIBERAL ARTS'

Lipscomb's leaders didn't approve Long's push for a competency-based framework because they were desperate for revenue. The university has been thriving in recent years,

having seen big jumps in its enrollment and endowment.

Graduate students in particular have been flocking to Lipscomb – over seven years, total enrollment in its professionally oriented graduate programs has gone from 200 to 1,700 students.

Many of those students are like Sessler, and bring a range of real-life experiences back to the classroom.

“We have a variety of populations that wouldn’t have been here 10 years ago,” says Lowry, Lipscomb’s president.

A desire to better-serve adult students was a big reason why Long first pitched the competency-based program back in 2006.

For example, she cites a recent change to Tennessee’s licensing requirements for alcohol and drug abuse counselors. The state recently required that those counselors hold at least a master’s degree. That’s a problem for many who, despite working for years in their field, never even completed a bachelor’s degree.

The university’s leaders decided they wanted to enroll more mid-career adult students. And they say the new competency-based programs are consistent with Lipscomb’s “holistic” approach to education. For example, the university owns a private, K-12 school system, meaning that students can attend Lipscomb from kindergarten until they finish their dissertation for a Ph.D., which some have actually done.

Part of the university’s shift toward adult students is a heavier focus on learning that feels familiar to

employers.

Lipscomb bought the rights to use the Polaris competency system from Organizational Systems International as the basis for its competency-based education model. The university calls the final product the Customized, Outcome-based, Relevant, Evaluation (CORE) program. Companies, including Nike, PetSmart and Disney, have been using Polaris competency training tools for decades. But Lipscomb may be the first university to use it for a degree program.

“I wanted to be able to use the language of business,” says Long, who worked for Disney for nine years (she also holds a law degree).

As a result, the assessment center is appealing to non-academics. Companies can use it to assess their employees’ skills for non-credit training. So far a major retailer, bank, local government agency and nonprofit groups have tapped the center’s offerings.

Long took the proposal for the competency-based framework to the university’s faculty for approval. Lowry says it passed without any lobbying by him.

W. Craig Bledsoe, the university’s provost, says faculty had some concerns about the proposed program. He did too. And relatively few professors have seen the assessment center in action. But they were sold in the end by the academic quality of the approach and its value to students.

“I walk a fine line here, because we’re a very traditional institution,” says Bledsoe. But he added that “we



Matt Sessler

can move faculty to what’s best for our students.”

Lipscomb was the first institution to apply for SACS approval for a competency-based program. Wheelan says the university’s application helped hasten the accreditor’s creation of a policy statement offering guidance to its members on competency-based approaches.

Issued in December, that nine-page document describes required procedures for institutions to create and notify the accreditor about direct assessment and hybrid competency-based programs. Institutions must go through a full accreditation review for a program that is more than 50 percent direct assessment, according to the rules.

Short of that mark “it’s just notification,” Wheelan says, “just like any other curricular changes.”

Wheelan praises Lipscomb for

being the first in the region to give competency-based education a try.

The creation of the program took longer than Long might have hoped, given that she first proposed it eight years ago. But she's happy with the

end result, and says the time wasn't right until the recent surge in interest in competency-based education arrived.

These days Long has become a sought-after speaker on competency-based education. She thinks the view

from her one-way window into the assessment center is a glimpse into higher education's future.

"What you're seeing in this room is liberal arts at its finest," says Long. "It's just a new face of liberal arts." ■

Competency-Based Transcripts

By Paul Fain

Northern Arizona University rolls out competency-based degrees, which will come with a new form of transcripts.

Students who enroll in a new competency-based program at Northern Arizona University will earn a second transcript, which will describe their proficiency in the online bachelor degree's required concepts. The university will also teach students how to share their "competency report" transcripts with potential employers.

The university shared a sample version of a competency report. The document looks nothing like its traditional counterpart, and lacks courses or grades.

Northern Arizona's first crack at a transcript grounded in competencies gives an early glimpse of how credentialing in higher education might be shifting, experts said. And while the competency reports could be improved, some said, the university also deserves credit (no pun intended) for attempting to better-define what students do to earn their degrees.

"Our employer studies show that

employers basically find the transcript useless in evaluating job candidates," Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, said in an e-mail message. "Higher education definitely needs to start fresh with a redesign of its public descriptions of student accomplishment."

Clifford Adelman agrees. Adelman is a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy and an expert on credentialing. He suggested several possible upgrades to a sample competency-based transcript from Northern Arizona, particularly the use of more specific language and fewer "generalized verbs." But Adelman also said the university was headed in the right direction.

"God bless them for actually trying," he said. "These are more effective statements than listing courses."

Northern Arizona is one of three universities that have jumped headfirst

into competency-based education by offering "direct assessment" academic programs, which are self-paced and completely untethered from the credit hour.

The other two are Southern New Hampshire University's new College for America, an associate degree-granting institution, and Capella University, which recently launched a batch of experimental business degree courses.

These programs differ from a larger number of similar competency-based offerings, including those from Western Governors University and "flex" options from the University of Wisconsin System, which are still officially linked in some way to the credit hour standard.

The competency-based approach has critics, some of whom say its focus on industrial-style efficiencies will shortchange lower-income students.

Even so, more colleges will get into the direct-assessment game soon, experts predict.

Several institutions are mulling how to create competency-based transcripts, said Michael Offerman, a former Capella official who has consulted with the Lumina Foundation on the emerging approach. Some of

those efforts will draw from Lumina's Degree Qualifications Profile, which attempts to describe what learning should go into a credential.

Offerman said the ultimate goal is a clickable, web-based transcript for competency-based programs.

Northern Arizona's accreditor, the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, in May gave a green light to the university's initial batch of "Personalized Learning" bachelor's degrees, which are in computer information technology, liberal arts and small business administration.

So far 100 students are in the process of registering for the fully online program, said Fred Hurst, senior vice president of Northern Arizona's extended campuses. The university hopes to enroll 500 students in the competency-based tracks by the end of the year, and is looking to recruit nationally.

COMPETENCY OF MASTERY?

Northern Arizona is currently in discussions with the U.S. Department of Education about the program. The department could soon allow federal financial aid to flow to students enrolled in it. College for America received the feds' endorsement earlier this year.

Hurst said the public university views its new competency-based project as an "innovation lab," which it will continue to tweak and improve. But the program is up and running, and university officials said they want it to be as substantial as it is experimental.

"This is a different model altogether,"



Compose academic essays in various rhetorical styles

Write a summary of a major position in Weber, Veblen, Cooley, and Mead and a research proposal and paper in a liberal arts discipline with an annotated bibliography.



Demonstrate knowledge of potential and limitations of technology's advances

Demonstrate understanding of impacts of technology on institutions and humanity. Discuss impact of technology on facets of psychology and Sociology, the perpetuation of stereotypes through technology and possible changes in human nature and ethics due to technology.



Practice an examined or self-reflective life

Discuss a personal statement of the importance of literature, film, and art in understanding human nature; also discuss a personal statement about film's impact in understanding culture. Journal about the meaning of life, explore connections between religion and art and explore connections between history and art/literature.

said Hurst.

Students work toward earning the Personalized Learning degrees by successfully completing assignments and assessments that are designed to measure their proficiency in cross-disciplinary concepts. The lessons are automated, but students can interact with university instructors or their peers in online "social spaces."

Tuition for the competency-based option is \$2,500 for a six-month subscription. Students can move as fast as they want through the course material and lessons, as long as they prove competency in each learning outcome.

Faculty members deem competency as being an 86-percent level of mastery. But students can go deeper, with the option of taking mastery assignments that show a higher level of comprehension.

"Mastery demands more complex application of the subject matter through an additional test, presentation, paper, case study or other form of assessment," according to the university.

Students will be able to display their achievements, including areas where they went above and beyond with either partial or full mastery, in the university-issued competency reports.

They will also receive conventional transcripts, however.

Faculty members designed the web-accessible reports, which describe the concepts and theories students have either mastered or demonstrated proficiency in.

The sample transcript linked above (a snippet of which is visible below) is for a graduate who majored in liberal arts and minored in small business administration. It includes checkmarks for each competency, bubbles with numbers that indicate each partial mastery and stars for full mastery.

For example, the hypothetical student earned full mastery status in each lesson under the heading "compose academic essays in various rhetorical styles." The student wrote a "summary of a major position in Weber, Veblen, Cooley and Mead," according to the brief enclosed explanation, as well as a "research proposal and paper in a liberal arts discipline with an annotated bibliography."

Schneider had two main critiques for an earlier draft of the sample transcript. First, she said the areas of study needed brief descriptions of the purpose of academic programs to "set a context for the specific competencies."

More importantly, Schneider said she wanted to see descriptions

of significant work the student accomplished in a program. Adelman echoed that view.

“Did she do projects? Research? A portfolio? Community service? Internships? One or more culminating or capstone assignments? What questions and problems did she pursue through her studies?” asked Schneider. “Detailing specific competencies is a good exercise for guiding curricular and pedagogical planning. But it doesn’t answer my questions about what kinds of sophisticated work the student has successfully learned to do.”

TWO TRANSCRIPTS, ONE DEGREE

A challenge for institutions with competency-based programs, particularly the direct assessment variety, is ensuring that students get credit for their work if they transfer out before earning a credential. Graduates could also face hurdles if they try to move on to graduate programs at other institutions.

Officials at Northern Arizona are

confident that they have figured out how to avoid potential transfer problems.

“We spent a lot of time ensuring that our students would not be trapped in that situation,” Hurst said.

The solution, he said, hinged on work faculty members did to “deconstruct” traditional courses. They mapped the learning outcomes from those three-credit offerings to competencies in the new online programs.

When students complete those lessons they automatically earn credit equivalencies for the conventional courses. So when they master the various elements that make up, say, accounting 204, Hurst said that course automatically pops up as being completed on an online dashboard students can access.

That mapping process is similar to the credit-hour links that institutions with other, non-direct assessment programs make in competency-based education. But in Northern Arizona’s case the work is done for students’

traditional transcripts, rather than for earning approval from accreditors or the Education Department.

However, the university hopes that students and employers alike will use the competency reports.

Alison Brown, associate vice president of Northern Arizona’s extended campuses, said the university would offer students training and tips about the documents.

“We think employers eventually will like that transcript better,” she said.

For now the university is covering its bases with both versions. One reason is that Northern Arizona wants to assure students that their competency-based credentials are just as real as those earned in the university’s brick-and-mortar degree tracks.

“While the experience of Personalized Learning is different, the degree you earn is not,” the university says on its website. “Your degree comes from a public, accredited university with more than 100 years of academic excellence.” ■

Leaving the System

By Paul Fain

More students are leaving higher education after their first year, according to new national numbers that are bad news for the college completion push.

The portion of first-time U.S. students who return to college for a second year has dropped 1.2 percentage points since 2009, according to a report that looks like

bad news for the national college completion push.

The findings are the latest from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. The nonprofit group

regularly releases studies based on the Clearinghouse’s data sets, which cover 96 percent of students nationwide.

According to the report, which was released in June 2014, 68.7 percent of students who first enrolled in the fall of 2012 returned to any U.S. institution the following fall. That number, which is the national “persistence” rate, was down from 69.9 percent for students who enrolled in 2009.

The 1.2 percentage point dip is substantial, as it applies to a total

enrollment of 3.1 million students. That means an additional 37,000 students from fall 2013 would still be enrolled under the 2009 persistence rate. The largest decline was among young students who were just out of high school.

Improving student retention was a heavy focus during the four-year period the center studied, with increasing attention by policy makers, accreditors and many college leaders.

Dewayne Matthews is vice president of strategy development for the Lumina Foundation, which plays a prominent role in the college completion agenda. He said the center’s findings were both surprising and disappointing.

“It’s a worrisome sign,” said Matthews. “We just added a bunch of people with some college and no degree.”

The new report also tracked the national retention rate, which refers to first-time students who return to the same institution after their first year enrolled there. That rate, however, remained virtually the same, holding at 58.2 percent.

Retention rates are lower than persistence rates because some students transfer or enroll at a new college after leaving their first institution. The relative dip in persistence means more students are leaving higher education altogether.

“For each entering cohort year, the overall persistence rate is about 11 percentage points higher than the retention rate,” the report said “Thus, about one in nine students who start college in any fall term transfer to a

different institution by the following fall.”

TOUGH QUESTIONS

Lumina has set a goal for 60 percent of adults to hold a degree or certificate by 2025. President Obama has set a similar target.

For several years the foundation has released annual reports on the progress made toward that goal. Gains have been incremental, and the updates depict the hard slog the completion agenda’s proponents face. For example, Lumina in 2013 projected under current trends that 48 percent of adults would hold degrees or certificates by 2025.

Yet the completion push clearly has increased the focus on getting

more students to graduation. State lawmakers have taken notice, and are increasingly tying funding for public institutions to performance metrics that include graduation rates.

While Matthews said the new persistence data raise challenging questions, they also add to the urgency around completion.

The report “reinforces the notion that we need to pay close attention to retention,” he said.

The center did not attempt to identify causes for the persistence rate’s decline. But the recovering economy is a likely culprit, experts said. The time period covered tracks along with the economy’s gradual improvement after the last recession. Some students

First-Year Persistence and Retention Rates, 2009-12 Entering Cohorts



likely are leaving college for jobs and not coming back.

Unemployment rates have dropped by 4 percentage points since 2009, said Jason DeWitt, the center's research manager.

He said students may be "opting for a short-term employment option" rather than college. The problem with that choice, DeWitt said, is it "can leave them underemployed in the long run."

That's because non-persisting students have joined the 36 million Americans -- or roughly 1 in 5 of working age -- who hold some college credits but no degree, according to Lumina.

FOR-PROFITS' GAINS

The new report breaks out data across sectors of higher education. For-profits were the only segment to see a gain in their persistence rates.

The biggest drop was at four-year private institutions, where the persistence rate for first-time students

fell 2.8 percentage points. The rate declined by 2.3 percentage points at both four-year public institutions and at community colleges. Four-year for-profits saw a slight improvement of 0.7 percent.

As with the overall rate, the report does not include possible reasons for the gains at for-profits. The sector saw significant enrollment declines during the time period, however, which could be a factor.

Noah Black, spokesman for the Association of Private Sector Colleges and Universities, the industry's primary trade group, said for-profits have invested heavily in boosting graduation rates.

"Our sector's focus on retention and graduation is showing here," he said. "They had the right support structures in place."

Across all of higher education, traditional-age students fared worse on the new persistence numbers.

First-time students under the age of 20 saw their rate fall by 1.8 percentage points, the study found. The 20-24 age group's rate dipped by 0.6 percentage points, while students over 24 had a 1.4 percent decline.

It's unclear why persistence is falling fastest for the youngest students.

Not surprisingly, part-time students have lower retention and persistence rates than their full-time peers, according to the report. But both groups had a drop in persistence since 2009.

"Getting past the first year, either by staying put or by transferring to another institution, is one of the most important milestones to a college degree," said Doug Shapiro, the center's executive research director, in a written statement. "We need to find better solutions for keeping students on track to graduation, whether that means the student transfers or stays put." ■

Two Pell Grants?

By Libby Nelson

A new report on rethinking financial aid calls for splitting the main federal need-based-aid program in two, with one grant for adult students and another for traditional-age students.

The year 2013 saw the unveiling of many proposals to reshape federal financial aid, including the final reports in the Reimagining Aid Design and Delivery project, a \$3.3-million effort from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation in its first major foray into

financial aid policy. With the Higher Education Act, the main law governing the federal government's investment in higher education, scheduled to expire, the policy proposals are likely to keep coming.

Many of those proposals, though,

have advocated overhauling smaller grant programs, student loans and tax credits while largely leaving the Pell Grant alone. They would perhaps limit the amount of time that students can receive the grants, require recipients to attend full-time or offer extra money to students who move more quickly toward a degree -- but not radically transform the grant, considered the bedrock of federal financial aid.

A new proposal released in April 2013 from a group convened by the College Board (and funded by the Gates and Lumina Foundations) takes a different

tack, focusing solely on overhauling the Pell Grant to better meet the needs of a growing population of nontraditional students. While the report calls for preserving the Pell Grant Program, in some senses it would be in name only: for students over 25 in particular, the system the report's authors envision differs sharply from the Pell Grant as it exists now.

The Rethinking Pell Grants Study Group, a group of 14 leading thinkers on financial aid -- some of whom also participated in the College Board's broader effort to rethink federal financial aid in 2008 -- starts with a couple of assertions: that it's time to consider postsecondary success, as well as access, in the grant program (a common refrain in financial aid proposals this year); and that an increasingly diverse student body, with widely varying educational goals, requires changes to a grant program intended for traditional college students.

They propose a system split into two tracks -- with one for recipients who begin their studies before turning 25, and another for those who do not. For students under 25, the grant would be renamed "Pell Grant Y" -- the Y stands for "young college students." The application process would be simplified, with eligibility based on adjusted gross income and family size. Eligibility would also be based on three years of tax data rather than one. The maximum grant would increase each year by the percentage increase in the consumer price index plus 1 percent.

The amount of money that students

receive would be tied to the number of credits they pursue in a given semester: students progressing more quickly toward a degree would receive more money than average. Grants would be limited to 150 credit hours. Given growing discussion of the death of the credit hour as more colleges explore competency-based learning, the group added that another "unit of progress" could be substituted for the credit hour.

"Students who know that their funding will end will have stronger motivation to complete their degrees more quickly," the report's authors wrote. "While there will always be individuals whose circumstances prevent them from accomplishing their goals, policies should be designed to help as many students as possible."

For prospective students 25 and older, who make up about 44 percent of Pell Grant recipients, the program would look different. Those students have lower completion rates than their younger counterparts do (56 percent earn a credential within six years, compared to 74 percent of students who began their studies before 24). They're more likely to pursue associate degrees and certificates -- 36 percent of Pell recipients age 25 and older are working toward a bachelor's degree, compared to 52 percent of students 24 and younger. And they're more likely to attend for-profit colleges: 31 percent attended for-profit institutions in 2007-8, compared to 16 percent of traditional-age college students.

For some of those students, the group argues, the Pell Grant is a



Sandy Baum

form of work force development or job training, sensitive to fluctuations in the economy and more likely to go to students with specific career and occupational goals.

"We need to acknowledge that a big, important function of the Pell Grant program is to fund older students, and their needs are not identical to those of younger students," said Sandy Baum, a senior fellow at the graduate school of education at George Washington University and an economist for the College Board, the chair of the study group.

They propose a different Pell Grant track named "Pell Grant A" for adult students. Students would apply once, before beginning their programs, and eligibility would be based on income -- with students eligible for a full grant, half a grant or nothing throughout their entire college careers. The size of the full Pell Grant would be set at a level that would allow community college students to pay for tuition, fees, books and supplies. As with the Pell Grant Y, the size of individual awards would be determined based on the number of credits a student is pursuing.

Since many adult students would have to stop working to attend college

full-time, the group also calls for the government to require or provide incentives for states to give students access to child-care assistance, Section 8 housing subsidies, food stamps and other welfare programs. And recipients of the Pell Grant A would also be required to get career counseling, which would be provided by the One-Stop Career Centers -- which offer job training referrals, counseling and other employment services -- created by the Workforce Investment Act. The report calls for \$900 million in new federal funding for the career centers to ensure high-quality counseling, but the Pell changes themselves are intended to be without what the report describes as "significant cost implications."

The Pell Grant for adult students is aimed more at vocational training than is the grant for traditionally aged college students. The change could be controversial: Many older recipients still choose to pursue bachelor's degrees, and some students would

also begin college receiving a Pell Grant for younger students, but turn 25 during their studies and shift into the program for adult students. And plenty of students younger than 25 pursue the vocational and technical degrees that the adult Pell Grant is meant to help with.

But the report's authors decided to differentiate based on age because it is a more clear-cut distinction than determining which programs are "occupational" and which are not.

"There is no line that can clearly separate Pell Grant recipients following traditional educational paths from those seeking more specific occupational education," the report's authors wrote. "However, age is highly correlated with these different paths."

NEW FEDERAL SAVINGS ACCOUNTS

The proposal also recycles one idea from the College Board's Rethinking Student Aid group in 2008: creating government savings accounts for low-income students who are likely to be

eligible for Pell Grants long before they enroll in college. The proposal calls for opening accounts for 11- and 12-year-old students whose parents' financial situation would make them eligible for Pell Grants, and annually depositing 5 to 10 percent of the Pell Grant for which they would be eligible.

Money would be available once the students turn 17, and could be used only for education expenses. The benefit would expire when the student turned 24. Every year, students and their parents would receive a notification of how much money is in the account, as well as an estimate of the Pell Grant, state grants and tax benefits for which they would be eligible if they were already enrolled in college.

The group estimated the annual cost of the savings accounts at about \$3.7 billion and argued that it "should be created when new funds become available" -- which, given the budget pressures alluded to throughout the report, could be a long time. ■

Who Benefits From Online Education?

By Doug Lederman

Black, male and academically underprepared students fare worse in online than in face-to-face courses, while outcomes for adults actually gain on traditional-age students in online settings, study suggests.

Online education is often held out as a way to increase access to higher education, especially for those -- adult students, the academically underprepared, members of some minority groups -- who have historically

been underrepresented in college. But that access is meaningful only if it leads somewhere, and if the education students get helps them reach their goals.

February 2013 data from a long-term study by the Community College Research Center at Columbia University's Teachers College suggest that some of the students most often targeted in online learning's access mission are less likely than their peers to benefit from -- and may in fact be

hurt by -- digital as opposed to face-to-face instruction.

The study did not, however, account for the quality of the online courses studied, making it difficult to draw from its findings overly sweeping generalizations about the efficacy of online learning.

The working paper, "Adaptability to Online Learning: Differences Across Types of Students and Academic Subject Areas," by Di Xu and Shanna Smith Jaggars, researchers at the center, expands on work from 2011 that found that students who enrolled in online courses -- controlling for various factors that tend to predict success -- were more likely to fail or drop out of the courses than were those who took the same courses in person. Notably, there was not a gap in completion between those enrolled in hybrid and in-person courses.

The new study is a follow-up prompted by questions from officials at the Washington State Community/Technical College System whose courses were examined. (The study examined the performance of 40,000 students in about 500,000 online courses.) "They asked us, 'So who? Is it all students who fare less well, or certain subgroups?'" said Jaggars.

The answer is that virtually every group of students fared less well (defined by the number of course credits they completed, and/or by their grades) in online courses than they did in on-ground classes.

But some groups fared worse than others. Men showed a more negative effect from online courses

than did women in terms of both course persistence and grades. Black students' grades fell significantly more in online courses, as did those of Asian students. Students with stronger academic skills saw their course persistence and grades decline less in online courses than did students with weaker academic credentials.

Like other groups, older students were less likely to complete online courses than they were on-ground courses, though their grades were actually slightly higher. But traditional-age students saw their comparative performance decline such that while they outperformed adult students significantly in face-to-face classes, they lagged their older peers in online courses.

To the researchers, the working paper's findings that "students who are already doing poorly in college do even more poorly when they take online courses" suggest several possible implications, said Jaggars. It may make sense, she said, "to restrict online courses only to students who demonstrate they do well in those courses."

Other options would include incorporating into the sorts of lower-level courses in which struggling students tend to cluster training in online-learning skills, to help such students adapt better to online environments.

And most of all, the researchers suggest, colleges should focus on improving the quality of all online courses, to "ensure that their learning outcomes are equal to those of face-

to-face courses, regardless of the composition of the students enrolled. Such an improvement strategy would require substantial new investments in course design, faculty professional development, learner and instructor support, and systematic course evaluations."

THE STUDY'S IMPLICATIONS

Jaggars acknowledged that the researchers did not do any analysis of the quality of the Washington State community college courses examined in the working paper. And that led numerous observers to urge caution in applying its results too broadly, as a *New York Times* editorial about the study arguably did.

The editorial focused on the terribly high attrition rates of noncredit massive open online courses and used the Community College Research Center's study to extrapolate about online learning generally: "The picture the studies offer of the online revolution is distressing."

Russell Poulin, deputy director for research and analysis at the WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies, criticized the *New York Times* editorial's "over the top" conclusions but said the CCRC study was an important contribution to research on online learning.

He applauded the study's focus on the need for students to "adapt" to online learning, and agreed that institutions needed to do a much better job ensuring that students are prepared to take online courses -- not by restricting which ones have access

to them, though, but by giving them more training in such courses, such as a required short course on online learning.

Poulin also said the study gave short shrift to the importance of building student services into online courses. “For the underprepared students that the study worries about most, student support services (advising, tutoring, library resource materials, study skills assistance, technical assistance) could be the differentiator,” Poulin said in a blog post. “These services may be readily available on campus, but might be available on a limited basis or not at all for online students. Those differences are not measured by the study.”

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been a major promoter and funder of the use of technology in expanding access to higher education – but it funded the community college center’s research, too.

Josh Jarrett, Gates’s deputy director



Source: [istock.com/ AmmentorpDK](https://www.istock.com/AmmentorpDK)

of education for postsecondary success, said in an e-mail message that the foundation hopes the Columbia study will “add additional research rigor to the ongoing conversation about online learning.”

He said the working paper buttressed Gates’s view that blended courses, by meshing online and face-to-face components, is “the approach we favor for the majority of the low-income, first-generation students for whom we

work.”

And Jarrett said the study should “caution us against simplifying the conversation into ‘online learning is good’ or ‘online learning is bad.’ I have seen really bad online courses and quite amazing online courses. We need to continue to understand what pedagogy, features, and supports lead to greater student success and encourage more of those practices – whether online or off.” ■

Front Line Instructors

By Colleen Flaherty

Writing professors find themselves playing a critical and unexpected role in the education of veterans.

INDIANAPOLIS – When student veterans open up to Lydia Wilkes, associate instructor of writing at Indiana University at Bloomington, she’s sometimes overcome by the “sense [that] this is a profoundly human moment that I’m going to screw up.”

Although made in some jest, the

statement summed up many of the anxieties professors of writing shared about serving student veterans during an all-day workshop in March 2014 on the topic at the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

Professors – some of whom were veterans, too – said their student

veterans had complex and sometimes contradictory needs, such as wanting to engage in material that would resonate with their military experience and at the same time make them emotionally vulnerable.

Because many composition instructors encourage their students to write about what they have experienced, they -- more than many other professors teaching veterans -- find themselves reading essays about the realities and tragedies of war. And sometimes course readings strike unexpected nerves. Student-instructor

conferences and class discussions can raise all kinds of issues that go beyond the experiences of a non-military 19-year-old. That creates opportunities for education and outreach, but also can create tensions that might not turn up in a physics or business class, for example.

Some of the other issues that are coming up: Student veterans want to be subject matter experts on military-based readings, but don't necessarily want to "out" themselves as veterans to the whole class. Student veterans want services and certain accommodations for their status, but don't want to be perceived as weak or needing help, participants said. And while student veterans crave structure, they don't want to be babied.

Student veteran panelists supported many of those observations. (And of course there are some veterans who would disagree with all of them.)

"My professors are pretty good for the most part, but I have some now treating everyone like they're 18-year-old freshmen who are wet behind the ears, and that just drives me insane," said Ryan Koch, a recent veteran and sophomore at Drake University. "They [assume we've got] no life experience, and I'm just sitting there with years of it."

Professors' anxieties also come from a lack of training. From instructors who want to better serve the few veteran students they have to those looking to get through to large numbers of veteran enrollees, they're largely on their own.

That training gap is particularly

apparent in writing courses, said D. Alexis Hart, a Navy veteran and associate professor of English and director of writing at Allegheny College who has researched veterans and writing. Writing courses, universally required, are often a point of "first contact" with veterans, and the subject matter is frequently personal. Despite that, Hart said writing program directors and professors often are unaware of veterans' services on their campuses, and have received little to no formal training on best practices for teaching student veterans.

And that's somewhat ironic, since workshop participants said best practices for veterans frequently are best practices for all students.

For example, said Catherine St. Pierre, a Ph.D. candidate at Ohio State University, a professor shouldn't call on a student and ask him or her to "speak for all of your kind." But even well-meaning professors might be tempted to do so.

Student veterans also reported hostility from professors who disagree with U.S. military policy -- part of the reason they're commonly reluctant to "disclose" their veteran status.

Matthew Bumbalough, a Ph.D. candidate in literacy, language and culture education at Indiana University, said he once had an adviser who said, "Oh, you're one of those," upon finding out he had spent seven years in the Army. "Bringing politics into it and not validating military experience is a good way to get yourself on my no-no list," he said, noting he promptly changed advisers.



Alexis Hart

David Collins, a former Army Ranger who now teaches composition at Metropolitan Community College's Blue River campus outside Kansas City, Mo., said he expected a certain amount of respect from professors.

"What makes you think your time is more valuable than mine?" he recalled telling one of his college advisers who was late to a meeting.

While best practices for veterans are still evolving, conference participants shared ideas based on their own research and experiences.

Joanna Want, a Ph.D. candidate in English and education at the University of Michigan, interviewed several dozen veterans on issues of access. She said veterans largely describe college as a work paradigm, not a social one. Fellow students aren't valued as peers, but as colleagues, especially if they're four things: experienced, reliable, hard-working and open-minded.

Marion Wilson, assistant director of the Muir College writing office at the University of California at San Diego, said she never envisioned even five years ago, upon moving to San Diego, that she would be teaching a course

“My professors are pretty good for the most part, but I have some now treating everyone like they’re 18-year-old freshmen who are wet behind the ears, and that just drives me insane.”

called “Military Matters.” But over the course of several years, the military became the lens through which she teaches her upper-level argument and analysis course. That’s because of the strong military culture in San Diego and the military’s proclivity for documentation -- great for research. Students are required to write a 13-15 page paper on one aspect of how the military matters in everyday life, and topics are as varied as alternative medicine in the military to civilian computer design products that are the product of defense-related research.

Because the course is for transfer students only, Wilson, said many students have military experience and can personally connect to the subject matter.

Bumbalough advised blogging as a medium for student veterans, noting that it’s popular among veterans in general. One common type of military blog is satire, he said, through which some veterans might feel more comfortable talking about uncomfortable experiences. Noting that past generations of veterans have written letters as a mode of catharsis, or “confession,” he mused over whether the immediate and public nature of blogging has fundamentally changed the way veterans process trauma.

Of course, he noted, students can’t be forced to confront their traumas, but professors should offer opportunities for them to do so. (Those in attendance said student veterans also should choose for themselves whether or not they want to confront death, killing and other potentially upsetting issues in war literature. The professor’s job is to warn them and offer an alternative, but not decide for them).

To leave room for such discussions and declare a safe space for her student veterans, Katherine Blackwell-Starnes, assistant professor of English at Lamar University, puts the following statement in her syllabus: “I recognize the complexities of being a member of the military community and also a student. If you are a member of the military community, please inform me if you are in need of special accommodations. Drill schedules, calls to active duty, complications with GI Bill disbursement, and other unforeseen military and veteran related developments can complicate your academic life. If you make me aware of a complication, I will do everything I can to assist you or put you in contact with university staff who are trained to assist you.”

The statement also includes on-campus resources for veterans.

And at Eastern Kentucky University,



Mathew Bumbalough

Travis Martin, now a Ph.D. candidate in literature at the University of Kentucky, helped design what he believes is the first-ever veteran studies minor and certificate program. Similar to ethnic or gender studies programs in design, Martin said the program approaches veterans’ issues “not in a stereotypical way, but in a critical way.” It also provides role models and advocacy for student veterans.

Martin, an Army veteran who deployed twice to Iraq, in 2003 and 2005, said he hoped the program would spread, and that it was time for higher education to invest in and formalize veterans studies, while the memories of war are fresh in students’ minds.

If there was one take-away from the workshop, he said, looking around, it’s that, “This should be bigger.” ■

Registering Toward Completion

By Allie Grasgreen

A simple yet uncommon approach to get students to graduation faster: let them sign up for the entire year's classes at once.

Cleveland State University's new strategy to get students to degree completion faster is a pretty simple idea that's surprisingly uncommon: students are allowed (and encouraged) to register for an entire year's worth of courses before the fall semester.

In the first year (2013-14) that Cleveland State offered the option, 60 percent of students used it. Officials expect that figure will climb to 80 percent in 2014-15, as they continue to advertise and sell the idea as a potentially money-saving tool.

"I think it's going to be of extraordinary importance toward completion," Cleveland State University President Ronald M. Berkman said. "If you expect Course B to be given in the spring, and Course B is the course you need to take before Course C, but it turns out Course B is not given in the spring.... Those are very, very real complexities for students."

Many Cleveland State students commute, have a family and/or work part-time. Being able to plan ahead, stay on track and save time and money on the way will make it easier to balance those responsibilities, Berkman said.

"I think in fact it has proven, for most students, to be a very valuable tool," Berkman said. "But it meant a culture

change."

Departments that are used to setting schedules several times a year now plan out fall, spring and summer terms all at once. It's a significant workload shift, but one that's encouraged faculty and entire programs to start considering their courses "in a more holistic way," Berkman said, through more regular and systematic planning.

"I'm not always sure that there was a great deal of thought about the symmetry between the courses of those two terms [fall and spring]. They happened in isolation of each other," Berkman said. "Now, they happen as a continuum."

Faculty Senate President Joanne E. Goodell said the change has most affected her and many colleagues by helping with work-life balance.

"When faculty have families, it is very helpful to be able to plan for a whole year," she said, adding that her husband doesn't have that luxury at his university, and last-minute changes are always possible. "I just think it's a very positive thing."

By choosing classes ahead of time, students can set their expectations and see a certain end goal, said Dan Hurley, associate vice president for government relations and state policy for the American Association of State Colleges and Universities.

"I can see very easily, conceptually, how the degree, or on-time or faster degree completion, would take place," Hurley said.

"From an administrative, operational planning standpoint, I think it lends a lot more ability to forecast and align resources toward that end."

Multiterm registration is uncommon, but Michigan State University adopted it a decade ago. The intention was to maximize the time available for academic advising, not to improve completion per se, but Michigan State Registrar Nicole G. Rovig said the system has proved very popular and helpful for students. (Michigan State students only register for summer and fall terms.)

"I'm kind of surprised it's not more widespread, because it's not technologically a challenge," said Michael V. Reilly, executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "I think it makes a lot of sense if you can do it. It's good resource planning."

Some colleges have tried to improve completion by tweaking registration in other ways; in 2013, the two-year College of Southern Nevada eliminated late registration, instead requiring students to sign up for a course by the night before it begins. Research has shown that students are less likely to complete a course in which they register late.

Berkman actually introduced the multiterm registration idea during his last year as provost at Florida International University, in 2008-9. There, only about 25-30 percent of

students (still nothing to scoff at) used the system. But Berkman credits better technology (the whole process is done online) and advertising for its popularity at Cleveland State.

But if students are racing to out-register one another to secure spots

for in-demand classes, could the latecomers be squeezed out? Maybe, but there's a backup option.

Once the wait list on any course reaches 25 or 30 students, the university opens a new section.

In 2013, 1,400 students got into their

desired class after resorting to the wait list.

"This is a real navigational tool for students," Berkman said. "The more tools that we can find to help students navigate, the more success we're going to have." ■

Views Articles

What Do I Tell My Students?

By Shawn E. Fisher

As an adviser to adults in English-language and GED programs, Shawn Fisher wrestles every day, on the ground, with the vocational vs. liberal education divide.

“Now bear with me, Gentlemen, if what I am about to say has at first sight a fanciful appearance.”

--John Henry Cardinal Newman, from "The Idea of a University"

Imagine your job is to help students get into college, and one of the students you're advising says to you, "It has always been my dream to study philosophy at Harvard."

Let's say that this student is graduating from a private prep school and you know that money will not be a major worry for her either during or after the college years. She has a deep hunger for knowledge, connections who can help her figure out a career path after graduation, and a family safety net that will catch her if she slips. How would you respond?

Now let's say that, instead of graduating from an elite high school,

this student is graduating from a local ESOL program, where she has been a student in night classes for the past three years, working her way up from near illiteracy to a decent command of spoken and written English. Let's say that she came to the U.S. alone as a refugee from a war-torn part of the world, and she worked with an employment counselor upon arrival to land a job in the fast-food industry before her tiny assistance allowance from the government ran out.

Let's say her counselor also helped her to find a room in a small apartment in a cheap part of town that she shares with two women she'd never met before she moved in. Let's say she works nearly full-time on an irregular schedule and sends money back to family members in her home country, hoping that her husband and young

child will soon be able to join her in the U.S. She, too, has a deep hunger for knowledge.

How do you respond now?

Or let's say that your prep-school student comes to you and says she wants to enroll in a patient care technician certificate program at a nearby community college. What do you say? How about if your ESOL student says the same thing?

If studying philosophy at Harvard seems like an extreme example, what if we changed it to studying international relations at a state university? Or what if both students wanted to start out studying history at a community college, with dreams of law school down the line? Would you encourage one and not the other? How different should advising be for different populations of students?

This is the question I struggle with every day, the dilemma that makes my head ache with an ethical clench. The idealist in me wants so badly to say that the students I advise – adult students in ESOL classes and alternative high school programs – deserve to be taken seriously when they express the same dreams and desires as those in more

privileged positions, that they should be challenged to consider educational programs that may not, on the surface, seem to be appropriate for their life circumstances.

After all, I got into the education game because I believe it to be a great equalizer – it opens up opportunities of all kinds, and everyone gets a place at the table where the ideas that shape the world are being discussed, debated, and refined. If we start selecting who gets to sit at that table, however well-intentioned we may be in doing so, what are we really doing? And what are the consequences?

I understand why, within the adult basic education world in which I operate, advisers, administrators, instructors, our national and state governments, even the students themselves tend to consider only those educational pathways that offer near-immediate payoffs: job-training programs; short certificate programs at public colleges; anything that bears the label “work force development,” the pragmatic antithesis to a highfalutin “liberal arts education.”

Older students, students with children, students with jobs, students with bills, commuting students, students who have already spent years sacrificing to acquire language skills and high school credentials ... none of them have time or money to waste, so they need to know that an investment of their time and money will yield a very concrete, very quick return.

They need to earn above the minimum wage, and since college is really the only way to reach that

end these days, we help them get to college. Or at least, we help them get to those colleges and those programs that serve specific vocational goals. Get ‘em in, get ‘em out, get ‘em to work. We score one for the completion agenda, and we’ve done our jobs.

But have we? Or are we diminishing the students we claim to care about as well as the concept of higher education itself?

This is a source of internal tension for me, because I’m sold on John Henry Newman’s idea of the university as the place where the primacy of a liberal education is upheld, over and above technical training.

He does not deny, and I do not deny, that a college education can (and probably even should) result in a good career. What he does deny, and what I also deny, is that this should be the only and principal result, for, as he argues, “education is a higher word; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent” which is truly useful, not “in any low, mechanical, mercantile sense, but as diffusing good, or as a blessing, or a gift, or power, or a treasure, first to the owner, then through him to the world.”

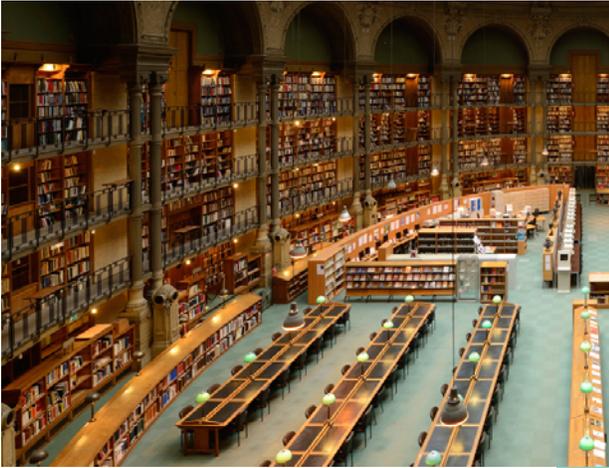
Education, if done right, confers a treasure – first to the student, then to the world.

Newman likens this educational treasure to physical health. No one would dispute that maintaining physical health is a good unto itself, which may even be worth a sacrifice of time and money. We can easily identify the innumerable things we are able to

do when our bodies are healthy, even though we cannot pinpoint an exact, specific use of good health. So, too, with a liberal education. Its practicality lies in the infinite unpredictable ways in which it will enhance all of our endeavors. “A cultivated intellect, because it is a good in itself,” writes Newman, “brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number.”

I’m hooked on this kind of higher, deeper, broader understanding of education that cannot, cannot be an elitist model, for it’s this type of education that yields a stronger, more useful citizenry. Engineers, paralegals, lab technicians, phlebotomists, all need to be considering and questioning their roles, as professionals and human beings. We all need to understand systems and question authorities. We all need to critically consider our world. The opportunity to do just that is what a college education should provide. To learn, to listen, to reason, to speak, to contribute and be heard. To flatten social hierarchies, to gain and to give social capital. To be equal. To develop marketable job skills in tandem – sure, absolutely – but not at the expense of the greater good to be gained.

I do not want to decide, and I do not want superficial circumstances to decide, which students can pursue a quality liberal arts education and which ones are shunted toward job-training programs. If the immigrants, high school dropouts, refugees, older students, single parents, ex-offenders,



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and full-time workers who come to see me wish to enroll in college, I want to encourage them to consider programs that go beyond pure skills instruction. They need to be at the table where the big, meta concepts are laid out for ingestion, or we risk filling these positions of power exclusively with people of privilege. We risk losing

nontraditional students' input and perspective within entire branches of knowledge, within countless spheres of influence.

I will admit, though, that I have a hard time advising adult students from this viewpoint when what they need in the short term is preparation for a job that pays the grocery bill. It is awfully

hard to say, "Study philosophy!" when they're desperate for relief from the burden of poverty.

Knowledge may be power, but a paycheck is survival.

I get it, I really do. But I sure do hate it. ■

Shawn E. Fisher is a pre-college adviser with JVS in Boston.

It's Andragogy, Not Pedagogy

By Andrew Joseph Pegoda

Andrew Joseph Pegoda says it's time to stop talking and thinking about teaching and learning with a term focused on children, not adults.

Some will immediately say this is nothing more than a semantics debate. No different than if we were discussing the contrasting meanings of, say, "soda" and "pop."

When we use the word "pedagogy" as a catchall for all teaching methods, of course, no one is talking about little children, but we rarely stop and specifically consider what this word

means and its relationship with other words.

Pedagogy: the methods and practice of teaching children.

Andragogy: the methods and practice of teaching adults.

So the question becomes: at what point is a student no longer a child, but an adult? There is no hard-and-fast rule, but for our purposes here, any

college student is an adult.

Andragogy, a concept dating to the 1960s and Malcolm Knowles, is important because it recognizes that adult learners are different and that these differences are extremely important. And its importance, as a body of knowledge and approach in and of itself, is profound and vastly under-recognized.

Andragogy -- adult learning theory -- stresses that adults:

- Are more independent than children when it comes to learning.
- Are capable of critical thinking (unlike some children) but are still interested in the "correct answer."
- Learn more slowly but just as effectively because they have more

life experience and deeply ingrained stereotypes and ideas.

- Must be given respect as adults and for their life experience or lack of experience.
- Need classrooms that embrace active learning, including hands-on activities.
- Learn material that is relevant for their needs.
- Are driven less by grades (performance goal orientation) and more by understanding (mastery goal orientation).

Going back to the question of when students become adults, in some ways it does not matter per se. All learners learn best when many of the core elements of andragogy are followed. All students — whether 5, 15 or 55 — deserve respect, need room for their prior experiences, and need lessons to be relevant. That said, the idea of andragogy exists on a sliding spectrum of sorts. Whether a student is 18 or 85, he/she will enter the classroom with experience, for example, but this experience will vary based on age, interests, background, etc.

This is also where some understanding of basic human growth and development theories (e.g., Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Erikson's stages of psychosocial development, Piaget's stages of cognitive development) can help professors build classrooms that are comfortable across the board. Students in their 30s will tend to have very different biologically driven needs, hopes, and fears than students in their 60s.

When students are not allowed opportunities for their feelings,

especially about particularly sensitive topics or topics to which they have been vastly miseducated or undereducated, learning stops. (Please see my comments about the trigger warning or objectionable material warning and student feelings here.) Additionally, we know that for learners of any age it is very hard, even physiologically impossible without extreme dedication, to “unlearn” what have been “core truths,” whether the topic is basic physics or the causes of the Civil War.

This said, pedagogy is still important because children do learn differently and have different needs. Most notably, children need some more guidance. Likewise, children — depending on



their age and experience (back to the sliding spectrum) — are physiologically not always capable of performing advanced math or demonstrating critical thinking. This is not at all to sanction the “banking method” — where teachers only lecture, metaphorically dumping information into students' brains and then students regurgitate that information verbatim on assessments — of education that has sometimes been all too common: Active learning and student-centered learning is always best.

One note on learning styles, too: adults do tend to think they have a learning style — visual, kinesthetic, auditory — that enables them to learn more effectively. While I have read much

more about andragogy than learning styles, there is some research that suggests learning styles are actually a myth. They have relevance because we give them relevance, but actually it is roughly equally possible for learning to happen visually or kinesthetically, for example, and furthermore, that ALL learners learn best when all learning styles are used. Going back to Bloom's Taxonomy: learning that involves interactive thinking, hearing, reading, writing, touching, and creating results in the most effective learning, and naturally, much of this will require independent learning and initiative by an adult student.

Even if we recognize that adults learn differently from children, by using the umbrella term “pedagogy” for both, we unconsciously tend to view adult learners as “children” who need to be taught by the “expert,” and we miss an entire body of knowledge and research about effectively teaching. I know some professors do not like the idea of being taught how to teach — they say it sounds too much like the training required to teach K-12. I too was somewhat like this when I first started teaching college in 2007.

But, as professors in the classroom, our ultimate goal should be for our adult students to learn, and for learning to occur, we should always be aware of how to teach effectively and stay reasonably up-to-date on findings as they develop. ■

Andrew Joseph Pegoda is completing his Ph.D. in history at the University of Houston, where he also teaches. He studies race, culture, human rights, and education.

Four Emergent Higher Education Models

By Steven Mintz

Steven Mintz considers future directions for colleges and their students.

The model that dominates nonprofit higher education today is under severe stress, particularly at the less-selective institutions that serve the bulk of American students.

Four forces – behavioral, demographic, financial, and political – have combined to disrupt these institutions’ business practices.

First, the student swirl. As fewer students earn their credits at a single institution, and take courses from multiple providers – from early college high schools, at community colleges, and from various online purveyors – the system of cross-subsidies that institutions relied upon to pay for small upper-division classes erodes. Every indicator suggests that the swirl, and the financial problems it creates, will intensify in the years ahead.

Next are the challenges posed by shifting student demographics.

A more diverse student body, with more low-income students, more English language learners, and more non-traditional students with a broader range of academic preparation places increasing demands on universities’ financial aid budgets and support services. Driving the growth in university administration are not only regulatory requirements, but the need

to provide enhanced assistance to today’s highly diverse student body.

Then, there are the mounting financial pressures as state funding per FTE student declines. Given competing demands on state budgets – involving Medicaid, mental health, K-12 education, transportation, and criminal justice – it is unrealistic to expect significant increases in state spending on higher education.

The most troubling challenge involves flagging political support for higher education, which grows out of the widespread belief that universities do not provide a good value for the money, that graduation rates are too low, and that graduates lack the skills that businesses expect. Universities, in short, face the task of providing a quality education with better learning outcomes and higher levels of student success much more efficiently.

Flagship campuses are best prepared to respond to these disruptions. By increasing funded research and donations from foundations and private individuals, expanding revenue from auxiliary enterprises and Continuing Ed, outsourcing “non-essential” university services, increasing reliance on adjunct faculty, and boosting admissions of international and out-

of-state students who do not receive financial aid, Research 1s seek to sustain their current model.

But these strategies work less well for less prestigious institutions. For these universities, a model built around the concept of more – more programs, more buildings, more grants and contracts, and more residential students – has done little to improve affordability, access, and student success. Nor has this approach enhanced institutional sustainability.

Clearly, new models are necessary.

Here are four alternative strategies that institutions are pursuing:

MODEL 1: THE EXTENSION MODEL

Similar to the twentieth century agricultural extension centers, this “Hub and Spokes” model distributes small academic centers across a dispersed region or metropolitan area. These academic centers serve solely as extension sites, where Continuing Education courses are offered either face-to-face or in a hybrid delivery modality. This model seeks to increase access and enrollment while discouraging competing institutions from intruding on a university’s “turf.”

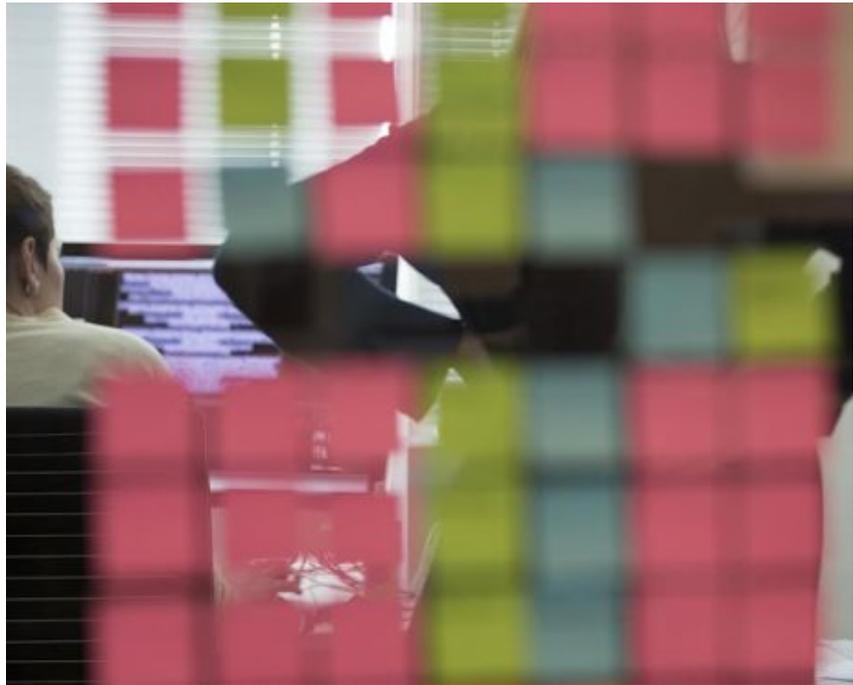
MODEL 2: THE DISTRIBUTED UNIVERSITY

A growing number of universities are adopting a variant on a model pioneered by community colleges: Setting up a number of satellite campuses under central direction. Some follow a “Shared Services Model,” in which the branches are independent in their academic offerings, while the

main campus centrally manages admissions, enrollment management, financial aid, and other support services. Increasingly popular is a “Campus Differentiation” model, in which each branch has its own distinct mission and focuses on a distinct student population, whether residential undergraduates, non-traditional undergraduates, graduate and professional students, or working adults. Then there is the “Centers of Excellence” approach, in which specialized programs are located in areas tailored to that specific area’s economic needs or strengths.

MODEL 3: THE UNIVERSITY IN THE CLOUD

This model, still rare at nonprofit institutions but common among the for-profits, involves “Distributed Delivery,” in which standardized academic programming is delivered at scale, utilizing fully online and hybrid delivery and videoconferencing or some sort of emporium model. Although many academics criticize this approach as a mass-produced machine learning, a scaled approach offers a number of potential advantages: It permits substantial investment in interactive learning objects and personalized, adaptive learning pathways, while



allowing institutions to redeploy faculty in high impact practices: seminars, writing intensive courses, undergraduate research, and capstone experiences.

MODEL 4: A STUDENT-CENTRIC MODEL

Rejecting the “one-size-fits-all” conception of education, this model seeks to serve distinct student sub-populations in divergent ways tailored to learners’ needs.

An approach that serves traditional undergraduates well often works poorly for degree completers, commuter

students, caregivers, or adults who are also working.

Some might best be served by a competency-based approach that optimizes time to degree; others by a career-focused curriculum; still others by a low residency model or a co-op approach in which paid internships are an integral part of the students’ degree pathway. ■

Steven Mintz is the Executive Director of the University of Texas System’s Institute for Transformational Learning and a Professor of History at the University of Texas at Austin.

Why Developmental English Breaks My Heart

By Pam Whitfield

Compared to what she does now, teaching courses like “Writing Poetry” and “Women’s Perspectives” was easy, Pam Whitfield says. But if she went back, who would help TJ or the anxious 30-year-old veteran?

His name was Bobby. He sat in the front row. He paid attention and asked smart questions; he engaged his classmates in debate. He wrote his first paper about pistol-whipping another 20-something in his trailer park over a drug deal. Bobby had so many stories. He wrote about rescuing a woman after she had been raped by a neighbor. He wrote about being homeless after he left gang life. He rode a beat-up bicycle five miles one way to the college in all types of Minnesota weather, then sat wet and shivering in the front row, his hoodie pulled over his head. In late November his girlfriend gave birth, and all we had left to remind us of Bobby was that empty front-row seat.

Next came TJ. He dressed like Eminem and sported white sneakers, floppy and unlaced. He smelled funny, an overpowering bodily odor that I would learn to recognize as meth recovery. His classmates avoided being put into groups with him; they gave him space around the table. Between classes, he chain-smoked in the courtyard. When he visited me during office hours, his hands shook from nicotine.

TJ wrote about dropping out of

school to join a circus. He had worked as a carnie and developed a nasty addiction. TJ wrote intoxicatingly about his past; he wrote convincingly about his new, sober life. He had no license, so his grandmother drove him to and from campus. But she was afraid to drive in snow or sleet, so TJ missed a lot of class.

TJ brought me an early draft of his essay to read. He also brought along his notebook from last semester’s remedial writing course, in which he had taken copious notes. He referred to those notes as he explained what he knew about paragraph structure, thesis placement, and the use of examples. We discussed voice shifts, tense shifts, and where to break up paragraphs. I encouraged him to visit the writing center, which I direct, and a tutor discussed his second draft with him.

The day I handed back these papers, he walked in late and slid into the back row. I walked to the rear of the room, still talking, and handed him a paper with a large blue A- circled at the top. I was already back at my teaching console, showing items on the course website, when TJ approached shyly and stopped me in mid-sentence by

holding up his paper.

“Is this my grade?” he asked.

“Yes, TJ, that’s your grade,” I replied.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes, TJ, you earned that grade through hard work and good revision,” I said, loud enough for the class to hear.

We all watched TJ walk, beaming, back down the aisle to his seat. TJ was my model developmental writing student. But three weeks later, he vanished from my class.

I have 60 to 80 developmental writing students in my classes each term; many of them lead precarious lives. They come to me, to college, to the hope of a brighter future, but they are wounded and vulnerable and unprepared. They lack self-confidence in general; they lack academic confidence in particular. And if one thing tips the scale out of balance in their precarious lives, they will disappear.

I lie awake at night, worrying about them. Not them collectively, as one-third are doing fine and another third are squeaking by. It’s the final third, the vulnerable ones, that rob me of sleep.

As a lifelong educator, I used to worry about paper-grading burnout. Now that my teaching load is largely remedial English, I worry more about emotional burnout: the accumulated psychological toll of caring for so many.

Because the more I care about my students, the more they break my heart.

I wish that I knew less about them, that they could simply be students to me. But the best subject matter for fledgling writers is their own lives,

and my students love to tell their stories. While my colleagues in other departments are feeding multiple choice bubble sheets into Scantron machines or ticking off points for math equations, I am scribbling comments in the margins of my students' papers. I am writing things like, "Do you know how to get a restraining order? Please ask me; I will help you" and "Here's the counseling #. Ask for Robert."

I am also writing letters and emails, to both these students and their advisers. I am seeking student services and support agencies for them. I am trying to put a finger in every hole in the dikes of their lives so that they can stay in my class, they can learn, they can move on to college level English and the rest of their lives.

I am teaching the disciplinary material which I was trained to teach, but I am also serving as a life coach, student success skills instructor, and amateur therapist, and I have no training in these areas.

Jeff is my latest heartbreak. The last day he came to my class was a much-publicized workshop day, and I was unhappy with him for arriving without his draft. When I asked him to retrieve it from his car, he stood up and nearly keeled over. He told us he felt funny, he felt tired; he slurred his words and the sentences trailed off. His classmates looked frightened. I told him to forget about the writing assignment and go

see the school nurse. I wish so badly that I had walked him to the nurse's office myself. He never went there. But she followed up, on my request, and has since told me that he is "under the care of mental health professionals."

I will never forget the shock on TJ's face, followed by intense pleasure, when I confirmed his A-.

Am I the only person to ever recognize TJ's academic aptitude, to ever tell him that he did a good job? I hope not. But so many of my remedial students hover on the brink of "I can't do this" that I work mightily to find qualities to praise, to point out aptitudes, even as I tough-love them with sentence structure, journaling, grammar quizzes.

I cannot say that these students disappear from the world; rather, they cease to attend my class. They are still members of my community. I saw Bobby in Walmart last spring, looking as happy-go-lucky as ever, as his friends shoplifted.

TJ may be the man putting my child on a carnival ride at next summer's county fair. Even if my female student does get that restraining order I mentioned in the margin of her last draft, she could still become a city statistic, another assault victim or death.

I live with my students perpetually on my mind. I worry about the stories that they're not telling me. Sometimes,

teaching them how to write college essays seems trite in comparison with the other challenges of their daily lives. I wish I could pour the knowledge into their brains, test them on it, and go home. I wish I could see them simply as students.

I know the way out of my dilemma. I could go back to teaching courses with names like Writing Poetry and Women's Perspectives.

I could teach the students who are college-ready, who passed that arbitrary, high-stakes placement test, or who have already schlepped their way through a remedial course like mine.

But then who would encourage John to get tested for dyslexia? Who would ask my Hmong student about her pregnancy, or my Somali student about her father's heart surgery? Who would watch the 30-year-old veteran's face for signs of anxiety and reassure him?

When I was a graduate student, teaching freshman comp, I used to walk home each day, asking myself one question: "Did I do a good job?"

At the end of a day teaching remedial English, I still ask myself one question, and it's always the same one: "Did I do enough?" ■

Pam Whitfield is an English and equine science instructor and writing coordinator at Rochester Community and Technical College, in Minnesota.

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